

HOW TO... Create an endless photo stack



Grouping images can look classy, but what if you aren't that artistic? Adam Banks explains how to make a natural-looking photo collage using Photoshop Elements 5

Collaging photos is a useful technique for both aesthetic and practical reasons. Sometimes a theme cannot be conveyed properly with just one photo; you need several to illustrate all the various aspects of your subject matter. Or you may have a set of photos that you wish to display together, but not in a rigid gallery format.

One way to construct a collage is to create a page layout with predefined slots and then fit the photos into them. This process is automated by various image-editing programs. In *Shopper* January 2007, for example, we showed you how to create a collage in Corel Snapfire. However, while the result looks neat, it is not very exciting.

To add interest to the arrangement, a popular effect is to rotate the photos randomly and overlap them. This, combined with a soft drop shadow, gives the impression of a stack of photo prints loosely spread out on a surface. It's a more complex process, but again software can partially automate it. The Photo Creations feature in Photoshop Elements 5 has various Photo Layouts, including some with overlapping snaps such as 3 Tilted. By choosing this and picking a Theme with borders or soft shadows, such as Simple Frame White, you can make a photo stack with a few quick clicks.

Unfortunately, you can't choose the exact number or shape and size of photos to use, so getting the result you want may be quite fiddly. The steps shown here, which can also be used in

other image-editing programs, allow you to produce your own photo stack from scratch that you can tailor to your own needs. The finishing touch is to construct the stack in such a way that your artwork can be repeated seamlessly up or down, left or right, to fill as large an area as you like.

You could use your endless photo stack as a webpage background, or print out multiple copies and stick them together to make a large banner or screen, or even to use as wrapping paper.

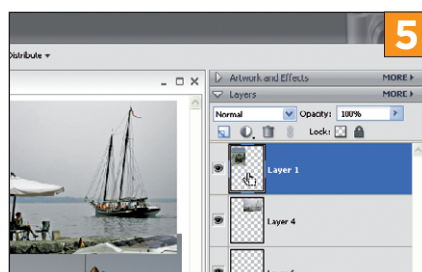
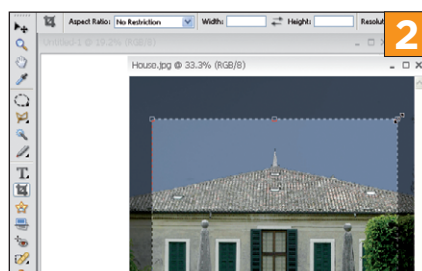
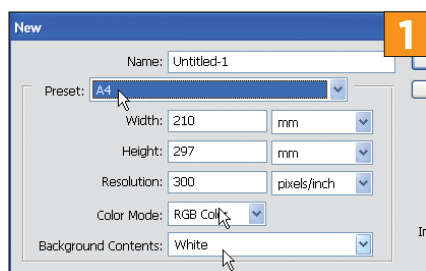
1 Run Photoshop Elements 5. From the Edit menu, select Enhance Photos. Go to the File menu and choose New, Blank File (or press Ctrl-N). If you're using an earlier version, choose Start From Scratch in the Welcome window. In the New dialog box, select A4 from the Preset drop-down menu. This gives you a full page with a resolution of 300 dots per inch (dpi), ready for high-quality printing. Color Mode should be RGB and Background Contents should be White.

2 You now have a blank canvas on which to create your photo stack. It's up to you how many photos to use, but we are going to use six. Choose Open from the File menu to select the image files. If your photos are all in the same folder, you can hold Shift or Ctrl down and click on multiple files to open them all at the same time.

For each photo in turn, use the Crop tool to select the part you want to use. Press C to activate the Crop tool. Delete any settings in the boxes in the Options bar at the top, leaving them blank. Then drag a rectangle around the required area and adjust it using the handles. If you intend to add a white photo border effect to the photo, leave room for this within your crop.

3 When you're happy with the way you've cropped your photo, double-click or press Return. Then press V for the Move tool. With the photo and the blank canvas visible in their respective windows, drag the photo on to the canvas. Crop each of your remaining photos and drag them on to the canvas, arranging them roughly in the places you want them.

4 Arrange your photos into what looks like a carelessly scattered heap, but which in fact fills the canvas fairly neatly and leaves the main subject of each photo visible. With the Move tool active (press V), make sure all the options in the top toolbar are ticked. You can then click on any of your photos and drag them around the canvas. Resize a photo by dragging a corner handle, then press Return to confirm. To change how the photos overlap, press the Ctrl and] keys to bring the current photo further forward, or Ctrl-[to send it further back. You can also flip a photo to face the other way by going to Image, Rotate, Flip Layer Horizontal.

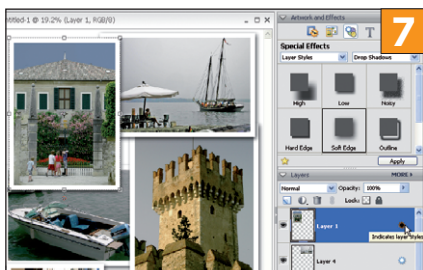


5 Once your photos are at the desired size, you can give one each a white border to make it look more like a real print. Doing it at this stage means you can make all the borders consistent. If you resized the photos afterwards, the borders would have different widths. If you do want to simulate a group of unrelated photos, perhaps from different periods, you could give them borders of different widths and make some of them yellow or grey instead of pure white.

Select a photo with the Move tool, then look in the Layers palette on the right (click on the disclosure triangle beside the word 'Layers' if you can't see its content, or select Layers from the Window menu if it isn't visible at all). The layer containing the selected photo is highlighted. Hold down the Ctrl key and click on the thumbnail image to the left of its name. This selects the whole photo.

6 Go to Select, Modify, Contract. In the Contract Selection box, enter a suitable amount for the width of the photo border; we have used 45 pixels. Click OK. You now have a reduced area selected, leaving an even margin all around the photo. Press Shift-Ctrl-I to invert the selection, then hold Ctrl, Alt and Shift down and click on the layer thumbnail again. This means you have just the border selected. Press D to set the background colour to white (default), or alternatively click on the Background swatch at the foot of the main toolbox on the left and select the exact colour you want. Then press Ctrl-Del to fill the selected area with this colour. Repeat for the other photos.

7 To complete the effect, give the photos soft shadows. With a photo layer selected, go to the Artwork and Effects palette (this opens in the same way as the Layers palette in Step 5) and click on the third icon at the top for Special Effects. In the first drop-down menu below, choose Layer Styles, and in the second choose Drop Shadows. Double-click on the thumbnail below labelled Soft Edge. The selected photo gains a realistic shadow. To apply this quickly to the other images, hold the Alt key down, click on the cogwheel symbol to the right of the selected layer's name in the Layers palette and drag it on to the next layer name. Repeat for the rest.



Frame academy Frames in Photoshop Elements 5

Photoshop Elements 5 has some very clever new features, but they can be confusing. When you make a collage as a Photo Creation, it uses Frames. This is a special type of layer with smart controls. You can also create these manually.

A Frame in Photoshop Elements 5 works like a frame in a desktop-publishing program. It acts as an invisible container for an image within your canvas. It can also have its own visible appearance, such as a plain or fancy border, a torn-edge effect or a pattern, with or without a soft shadow. You can drag and drop an image into a Frame, then resize and rotate it independently of the Frame itself.

Scaling the image content of Frames is non-destructive. Having placed an image in a Frame, you can resize it down to a tiny size (the Frame's border stays at the same predefined width rather than resizing proportionally), then change your mind and scale it back up, and the final image quality

will be the same. If you did this with a conventional layer, the quality would be visibly degraded.

We haven't used Frames to construct the endless photo stack because they're only supported by Photoshop Elements 5, which not all users have. If you do, and you want to use them, here's how. Open each of your photos. In the Artwork and Effects palette, click on the first icon at the top for the Artwork options, then choose Frames from the first drop-down menu. Find a suitable style – try White 40px – and double-click on it. The image is placed within the frame. With the Move tool (the first icon in the main toolbox on the left, or press V), click on the framed image and drag it on to your blank canvas. It should keep its frame.

Repeat for your other photos, then reposition and resize as you like. When a Frame gets larger or smaller, it keeps its preset border thickness.

8 Roughen up your stack a bit more by rotating each photo slightly, as if at random. Click on the photo and move the mouse pointer just off one of its handles: the cursor turns into a turning arrow. Click and drag to rotate a few degrees, then press Return to finish. Reposition the photo if necessary by clicking within its boundary and dragging. In doing this, check that no photo or shadow goes off the edge of the canvas.

9 When you have no more adjustments to make, click on the first layer in the Layers palette, hold down the Shift key, then click on the last (excluding the Background), highlighting them all. Press Ctrl-E to merge all the layers into one layer. Choose Duplicate Layer from the Layer menu. When the Duplicate Layer box appears, click OK to make a copy of your collage in another layer.

10 To create an endless repeat, the trick is to offset this copy. From the Filter menu, choose Other, Offset. Under Undefined Areas,

pick Wrap Around. Now set the Horizontal and Vertical offsets to about half the size of your canvas – in this case about 1,200 pixels right and 1,800 pixels down. The upper layer shifts, and you'll see one copy behind the other, giving the impression of twice as many scattered photos.

11 Adjust the offsets to make an effective arrangement, with the photos behind filling the gaps between those in front, both in the middle and at the edges. It doesn't matter if there are still a few gaps left here and there.

12 The Offset process ensures that the pattern repeats seamlessly. Where the image goes off the bottom, it continues at the top, and where it goes off the right-hand side it continues on the left. Just be sure that if you want to adjust the positioning, you go back to the Offset command. Don't use the Move tool to reposition the layer or you'll break the seamless repeat. Another valid way to vary the result is to go to Image, Rotate and choose Layer 180°, turning half the stack upside-down. **CS**

